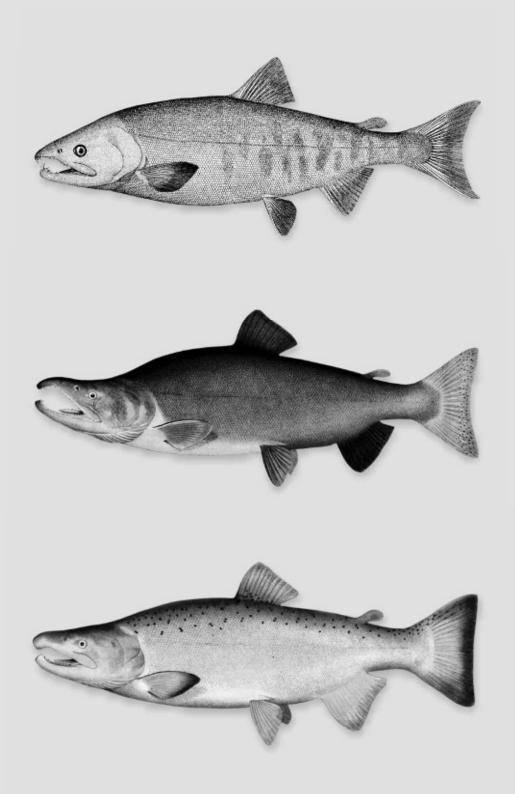
Fish Report No. 4:

The Dungeness Crab Industry Develops in Gustavus—Dan Foley— Tom Traibush— Charlie Clements



Dan Foley

Figure 23: Owner of Icy Passage Fish, Dan Foley, loads live crab into a small

plane at the Gustavus airport. The shipment was transferred in Juneau

to Alaska Airlines for transport to

markets in the Lower-48. (courtesy

James Mackovjak)

Dan Foley can be credited with pioneering the modern seafood processing industry in Gustavus. Foley came to Gustavus in 1976, after a stint working on the Trans Alaska Pipeline. In 1978 he journeyed to Maine, where he purchased a used 33-foot wooden-hulled lobster boat. He renamed the vessel Margaret Mary in tribute to all the Sister Margaret Marys he'd had as teachers in Catholic school, and trailered it to Haines, about 100 miles by water from Gustavus. Foley's original plan was to fish shrimp in Lituya Bay, but he decided that Dungeness crab might afford a better opportunity for success. However, Pelican Cold Storage, the only buyer of Dungeness crab in the area, was not interested in purchasing crab he might catch because of its exclusive arrangement with Duke Rothwell. Foley decided to market crab on his own. In 1979, he flew to Seattle, rented a car, and drove down the coast to San Francisco, stopping everywhere along the way that he felt he could learn something about Dungeness crab. In San Francisco he learned that Southeast Alaska's summer Dungeness crab season coincided with the Bay Area's main tourist season. Importantly, the Dungeness crab fisheries in Washington, Oregon and California were winter fisheries, so vendors in San Francisco relied on frozen crab for the summer trade. He also learned that the "crab feed" season in the Bay Area coincided with the fall Dungeness crab season in Southeast Alaska.

Foley had found a ready market for his crab. Though they are often considerably more expensive, live (or freshly cooked) crab are generally considered superior to frozen crab, and would be appreciated in the affluent Bay Area.

Foley returned to Gustavus and established Icy Passage Fish in a World War II-era building at the airport. His business plan was to ship live crab—initially those he himself caught—to San Francisco via Alaska Airlines, which served Gustavus during the visitor core operation remained shipping live Dunge-



ness crab. The Margaret Mary was fished by Foley and several others in Dundas Bay, Glacier Bay and Icy Strait. AAA 353

Tom Traibush

Tom Traibush came from Colorado to work at Glacier Bay Lodge in 1977. In 1978 or 1979, using a sport pole, he fished halibut commercially from a skiff. His humble entrance into Dungeness crab fishing came in 1981 when he purchased 15 or 20 crab pots. Traibush worked on the Glacier Bay Lodge tour boat *Thunder Bay* during the day and fished crab in Bartlett Cove and the Beardslee Islands during his off hours, pulling pots by hand from a 16-foot open skiff powered by a 10-horsepower outboard motor. Most of his crab were sold to Glacier Bay Lodge, and the remainder were sold to local tour boats. Traibush wanted to expand his operation, and in 1982 he approached Dan Foley, owner of Icy Passage Fish (see above), about the possibility of purchasing his crab. An agreement to do so was reached, and Traibush quickly upgraded to the Fat Man, a new 15-foot heavy-duty Kodiak seine skiff powered by a 35-horsepower outboard motor and equipped with an electric pot hauler. He also increased his pot count to 50 or 60.354

season. During the fall season, crab would be transported to the Alaska Airlines's facility in Juneau on small commuter planes (see Figure 23). Although Icy Passage Fish did some freezing of fish with makeshift facilities, its

AAA In 1994, Gregg Renkes, an aide to Senator Murkowski, characterized Foley's business as a model for Alaska.



Figure 24: Dungeness crab fishermen Charlie Clements just in from the Beardslee Islands with his catch. (courtesy Deb Woodruff)

Charlie Clements

A native Alaskan, Charlie Clements mostly worked seasonal construction jobs. During the summer of 1980, on his 40th birthday, Clements and his friend (and later wife), Deb Woodruff, were kayaking in Secret Bay, in the Beardslee Islands. They noticed big Dungeness crab walking their sideways crab walk across the bottom. Duke Rothwell had been fishing the Beardslees for years, and was likely letting Secret Bay "rest" for a spell to let the size and quality of the crab increase. Clements was looking for a change in his life, and decided then and there that he'd be a commercial crab fisherman (see Figure 24). His previous experience with commercial fishing was a season spent hand trolling from a sailboat and fishing commercially for halibut with a sport pole from a small skiff. Clements purchased the 38-foot Rust Bucket, a steel lifeboat that a group of young fishermen had converted into a hand troller. It was slow and hardly handsome, but fairly roomy and cheap. He began fishing in 1981 with 40 rusty crab pots. Fishing in Secret Bay was initially very good: Clements recalled one pot that came up absolutely stuffed with 55 large male (he estimated they averaged three pounds) Dungeness crab. Clements sold his first load of crab in Juneau, a long day's boat journey each way in good weather. Not long after, he established a local market with Icy Passage Fish and later with Point Adolphus Seafoods.

Traibush and Clements shared humble entries into the Dungeness crab fishing business. It was just a short while, however, before both Clements' and Traibush's Dungeness operations ranked among the most productive in Southeast Alaska. Part of the reason for their success was the high quality of the Dungeness crab in Glacier Bay. Dungeness crab differ between locations, and those in Glacier Bay had a solid reputation as being large, hard-of-shell, and clean, all highly-marketable attributes on the West Coast live crab market.

But there was more. The waters of the Beardslee Islands are relatively well-protected, an important factor for small-boat fishermen who sometimes work late into the stormy fall season. Also, for fishermen based in Gustavus, the Beardslees were easily accessible from Bartlett Cove, particularly at high tide, when one could enter or exit the Beardslees directly from Bartlett Cove through a short tidewater channel that is known locally as "the gut."

The local knowledge acquired by these fishermen (and others) was another significant factor in their success. Unlike the big, relatively uniform, open areas such as the Gustavus flats (along the Icy Passage/Icy Strait mainland beach from Falls Creek to the Good River) that are usually fished with long strings of pots, the Beardslee Islands are a complex array of channels, bays and inlets of varying depth. The Dungeness crab fishery there was more of a

"pothole" fishery where local knowledge, including an understanding of seasonal variables, was a key to success.

Traibush and Clements were smart and worked hard, but the acknowledged master of fishing Dungeness crab in the region remained Duke Rothwell. Until Traibush and Clements entered the fishery, he really hadn't had much competition. Other than occasionally remarking that it was "gettin' hard to make a living around here," Rothwell was very neighborly with the relative upstarts.³⁵⁵

